

HUMSAFAR

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Yaghis -- the "ungovernables"; that was the name given to the people who inhabit a tract of land in the North, west of the Indus and stretching as far as Afghanistan. Virtually unexplored until the British came during the last century, Yaghistan became an important element in the Great Game.



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YAGHISTAN

Land of the Rebellious

written & photographed by H Peccavi

Along the River Indus only, as in neighbouring Indus-Kohistan, there existed independent communities eager to defend their liberty against foreign invaders but internally split by perpetual feuds. Their land was called Yaghistan, "Land of the Free", and it was famous for its anarchy.

*Dr Karl Jettmar
"BOLOR AND DARDISTAN"*

The first time I heard the word Yaghistan mentioned to me was during my exile in Gilgit. No, I was not posted to that backwater but resident there of my own will, savouring the life of a vagrant in the high hills.

My informant was an old carpenter named Nagir Shah, the second part of his name in no way signifying that he claimed to be a Syed, it being a common enough

was residing interrupted his work often to peer into the past and relate anecdotes and incidents; at times I gained the distinct impression that his frequent interruptions were as much a ploy to work at a leisurely pace as to have a captive audience. Nevertheless I enjoyed his company.

He spoke quite fondly of the British political agents, officers and subalterns who served in Gilgit before Partition. During one of his



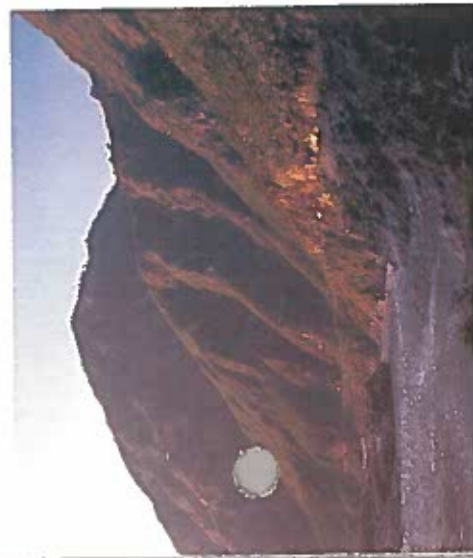


entrance to which looked forbidding. Many years later I was fortunate enough to trek up the Kandia valley but the experience of trying to discover the boundaries of Yaghistan was frustrating to say the least, because the least was all I could find on this enigmatic, elusive, anarchial land.

Yaghistan was the name given to that tract of land to the west of the Indus where it bordered the state of Kashmir and as far as distant Afghanistan. It was vague and loosely applied name to describe the country inhabited by the Hindukush and Trans-Indus Kohistani tribesmen who for centuries had maintained their liberty, living as they did in the cloistered confines of their craggy canyons. Literally, the word Yaghi in Persian means rebel and thus Yaghistan the Land of the Rebellious, but it was also used in the sense of a land unknown - a *terra incognita*. The people of these mountain strongholds, even in the smallest hamlets, gave allegiance to their elders or tribal councils to which even women might be admitted. Thus their practice of democracy and self-

viewpoint the boundaries of Yaghistan were rather elastic.

After I decided to move from Gilgit to the fleshpots of Rawalpindi I forgot all about Yaghis and Yaghistan until I started to wander around in Swat and had my first encounter with the Kohistanis from Gabrial in the Kandia valley. They were a poor and hardy people, ill-clad and undernourished. They came from their valley over different passes of the Siri Dara group of mountains to trade their much-prized rancid ghee for salt and other necessities in the village of Kalam. They carried the ghee in goatskin hides and the salt in



who, in 25 years of trying to assert his influence in Yaghistan had his troops "ambushed and besieged by each and all of the various Hindukush tribes." But that was of the Maharaja's own doing. He had no business conducting affairs of state west of the Indus, as the Treaty of Amritsar by which Gulab Singh acquired Kashmir from the British, put his possessions eastward of that river so that if his successors were quietly extending the frontiers of Kashmir, it was with the tacit approval of the paramount power if not its knowledge. Needing little encouragement and even less excuse to annex further territory, the Kashmir forces made frequent forays into the Gilgit area. Just as frequently were they driven back. The Maharaja's hold on Gilgit was at best tenuous and he could not guarantee the safety of anyone venturing into Yaghistan. Very few Europeans had been as far as Bunji or crossed the Indus there.

Towards the end of the 19th century the British Empire under Victoria was at the zenith of its power and glory but not unchallenged in Asia. Russia's continuing advances into the central Asian republics and Khanates alarmed those who managed British India's external affairs. In the event of a Russian threat to India from the north, a defensible Kashmir frontier had to be found and an effective guardianship secured over the passes which led to India, but it was often an instance of shutting the passes after the

Russians had stolen a march on or through them. It was reported that a Russian agent had been received by the Mir of Hunza and there was nothing to prevent 1,000 cossacks under a Russian officer like Janov from galloping across the passes of the Hindukush and watering their horses at Woollar Lake in Kashmir in a matter of two weeks.



*ABOVE: Children of Kandia work to construct a road to link them to the Karakoram Highway.
CENTRE: The Indus with Dassu in the distance.*



that the Hunzakuts had returned to their traditional occupation of caravan raiding. After the capture of Hunza and Nagar, Chilas was burnt down by Robertson. Three years later Robertson was besieged in Chitral Fort, which led to the Chitral campaign. In less than four years Pax Britannica had re-established the boundaries of Yaghistan to its present position, namely the valleys on both sides of the Indus below Chilas including the new district of Kohistan.

Until a few years ago Yaghistan was a closed, unvisited and unknown area. Then an earthquake, and the subsequent establishment of the Kohistan Development Board, a relief and development project, radically altered the area. The project was fortunate in having as its chairman, Jan Nadir Khan. An engineer by profession, he has the unusual mix of talent, skill and romantic idealism with which to tackle the development of such a

so close to India and the Kashmir army inadequate to meet any threat it was left to the soldiers and political agents of Her Majesty's government to do this. With the establishment of the Gilgit Agency, the Great Game or cold war of the period was resumed in earnest. Between administering the tribes and hunting ovis poli the men who manned the frontier outposts



their own social practices amongst the Yaghis.

The system, however, as democratic as it might seem, was so riddled with factions and other inequalities that it seldom worked. It has been given the name "acephalous" or headless to describe the almost anarchical condition of Yaghis, each of whom is a republic unto himself. Of the acephalous states that existed in the 19th century the littles of them comprised only seven households and might well have been the smallest independent state in the world



pursues his feuds vigorously is held in high esteem by family and friends. Friends? Besides upholding the honour of a family a man also proves his ability to look after family interests, if, say, he is elected to a jirga. A remarkable feature of these quarrels is that they do not involve outsiders, which should be a relief for visitors.

The other oddity is *Wesh*, or redistribution of agricultural property every five years to ensure a theoretically equitable distribution of land amongst families, at times amongst villages and sometimes

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